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Teaching for Transformation: Structured Cross-Cultural Experience in Transnational Contexts

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Abstract: The purpose of the study was to explore transformational learning in the context of cross-cultural, transnational study. In particular, it explored the ways in which a short-term study abroad program facilitated transformational learning opportunities for its adult participants. Data were collected through narrative surveys, students' research projects, and researchers' field notes to investigate promising program components and strategies.

Introduction

As our world has become increasingly globalized, international education in the form of study abroad programs has become increasingly prevalent, and students in higher education are often motivated to participate in short-term or longer-term study abroad programs. In addition to providing learning opportunities in students' respective subjects, such programs are also expected to challenge and expand students' worldviews by allowing them to be fully immersed in substantive cross-cultural learning experiences.

For the past two years, the authors have designed and implemented a two-week study abroad program for graduate students majoring in Education. The program aims to explore the impact of globalization on the Chinese Diaspora through lectures, discussion, individual research projects, a factory visit, and comprehensive visits to different types of schools in Hong Kong and Southern China. The entire program occurs in a transnational space, where students are constantly encouraged to observe, reflect, compare and contrast the educational and socio-economic experience of the Chinese Diaspora on both sides of Pacific Rim, the West Coast of the U.S. as well as the Southeastern Coast of China. Although the program is relatively short, the structured cross-cultural learning experience it provides is meant to strongly challenge the lenses that students use to view the world and themselves. The majority of program participants voluntarily wrote in program evaluations or in their research projects, or verbally expressed to faculty members that they had gone through "transformations", "paradigm shifts," or "life-changing experiences" as a result of their journey. Therefore, it seems likely that many of the program's participants collectively or individually went through varying aspects of a transformational learning process as a result of participating in the program.

Theoretical Framework

The process of transformational learning has one of the most commonly-discussed areas within the field of adult education in recent decades. Mezirow defines transformational learning as a process by which individual critically challenges one's perspectives to allow for "more inclusive, discriminating, [and] open" perspectives to emerge and to guide revised behaviors and actions (2000, p.8). Since transformational learning was initially theorized by Mezirow in the late 1970s, a great deal of work has been done to explore, document, expand, as well as critique the concept (Taylor, 1997, 2005). Although experience, critical reflection, and adult development are described as common conceptions underlying *all* kinds of transformational learning (Merriam,

Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2006), the process of transformational learning itself has, in fact, been redefined and expanded over time to become more comprehensive and multi-dimensional (Taylor, 2005). Components such as one's context, biography, emotion, collective experience (class, race, culture etc.), it is now agreed, need to be factored into transformative learning to present a more holistic view of what the experience entails (Baumgartner, 2001; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Tisdell, 2003) .

In addition to its theoretical dimensions, discussions of transformative learning have also concentrated on strategies adult educators can apply in their classrooms to facilitate the process of transformative learning (Cranton, 2002). Strategies recommended to enhance various phases of transformative learning have included materials representing multiple perspectives, critical incidents, critical debate, reflective journals, and support groups, to name a few (Cranton, 2002). Beyond these suggestions, however, it is also evident that few studies have documented how structured cross-cultural experience in transnational contexts may also be used to facilitate transformational learning.

Taylor's research (1994) has portrayed how sojourners, such as international business persons and diplomats, may gain intercultural competence as a form of transformational learning. In contrast, our program participants reported that their structured cross-cultural experience actually enabled them to develop more integrated perspectives and deepened beliefs about their professional capacities, including their roles as educators with increasing confidence to serve their students. Our questions then became, for those participants who have experienced transformative learning through a structured cross-cultural experience, what does the process look like? How is their process similar to or different from those discussed in the existing literature (Taylor, 1997)? Further, in what ways and through what components might structured cross-cultural experience trigger and facilitate the process of transformative learning?

Given that the purpose of this study was to explore ways in which a structured cross-cultural experience provided through a short-term study abroad program in a transnational context facilitates transformational learning among adult students, the research questions used to guide the study included the following:

1. How did the transformational learning process unfold as perceived by the adult learners in this study abroad program?
2. How did the design and curriculum of the study abroad program trigger or facilitate transformational learning process?
3. In what ways did adult learner's identities (including race, class, gender, nationality etc.) contribute to their process of transformational learning?

Methodology

To understand and capture the thoughts, beliefs, emotions of the research participants, a qualitative study design was adopted as being most suitable for this research purpose. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit research volunteers from study abroad participants who went through a transformative learning as a result of their participation (Merriam, 1998). Moreover, the researchers made an effort to recruit participants of different races, genders, cultural backgrounds, and nationalities to maximize diversity. Data were collected through an open-ended, emailed survey with 6 research participants, content analysis of student research projects, as well as researcher field notes. In-depth narrative responses to the survey questions were coded and analyzed along with students' research projects and researchers' field notes to allow for themes to emerge.

Findings and Discussion

Based on data analysis, three main themes emerged that addressed our research questions. These themes included the following:

Integrated Views or Deepened Awareness as Result of Transformational Learning

All of the research participants described their transformational learning in similar ways. Such terms as “eye-opening”, “life-changing” experience were common. Others reported that they had developed “a fresh perspective” or learned to “lean into discomfort,” which in turn led to more self-reflection. All reported that they had either acquired more integrated and expanded views or developed deepened awareness in their professional domains. Two female and two male participants who were currently working as classroom teachers spoke of being able to view themselves as more confident educators, redefining the meaning of teaching for each of them. As Joe, one of the male teachers reported, “Prior to the trip, I could not imagine myself teaching kids.... The opportunity to engage with different teaching techniques in China allowed me to understand more about my abilities as a teacher. I now understand the strengths I possess in working with children”. A female teacher, Patti, described herself to “have gone through a process of transformational learning in the form that my eyes are open to newer ways of teaching... [they] have changed my conception of what education is and what education should be.” Chris also claimed that, professionally, he could “better understand not only the Chinese American students I serve, but also the global context of education that affects all my students.... [I have] expanded the scope of my analysis to include more issues of globalization and transnationalism in education”.

In addition to more integrated and expanded vision as educators, students’ narratives also demonstrated deepened awareness about the transnational social inequities they observed as a result of the learning experience. Jeff said this most eloquently:

Prior to this trip, I was able to notice inequities and cultural capital being used in ways that perpetuated various levels of hegemony. Race, class, ability, gender, [sexual] orientation, etc. all played a part. Seeing these inequities in Asia allowed me to step back from experiences in the U.S. and catch a glimpse from an outsider’s point of view. At the end of the day, there were many differences, but I think the idea of ‘global commonalities’ really stood out.

Echoing Jeff’s words, Levine summarized her observations in Southeastern China: “It showed how much similar global poverty is across the board and how marginalized people face similar struggles and experiences across borders and continents.”

Overall, all research participants seemed to have gone through some degree of transformation, since many developed more integrated views and deepened awareness in their professional domains. However, Chris, himself a Honduran immigrant, was the only participant who portrayed a complete process of perspective transformation, comparable to the stages highlighted by existing literature (Merizow, 2000). His ongoing process of transformational learning, as he noted, “involves taking in new information to challenge already held beliefs, assumptions, or practices” This journey, in fact, altered his academic, professional, and personal trajectory, since it resulted in his being accepted as a Ph.D. candidate in Hong Kong University. It

thus appears that all of the program's participants demonstrated impacts of transformational learning in different domains and to various degrees.

Individual Biography Shapes the Transformational Learning Process.

This finding supports the claims of previous studies (Lee, 1999; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006) which suggest that the role of individual biography shapes the transformational learning process. During the program, some of the participants began to reflect on how their identities (racial, cultural) and lived experience shaped the process of how they made sense of their learning experience. Renee, a Chinese American female teacher, pointed out that this program allowed her to reflect on why her culturally grounded teaching philosophies differed from many of her White peers:

Now I understand why I have the philosophies and expectations that I do and why I often feel like I was swimming against the tide in my attempt to establish the culture and norms needed for my style of teaching in the classroom.... I have also learned how much important cultural beliefs, traditional philosophies etc. have on teaching and learning

Another example was articulated by Kattie, a Latina female participant, who shared her own experience of baby-sitting white children in New York City when she observed White and Chinese children in the wealthy parts of Hong Kong being cared for by darker-skinned nannies from the Philippines and Indonesia. Reflecting on her own racial identity and lived experience, Kattie not only made sense of her experience but also helped the group contextualize and analyze issues of transnational labor. It was her racial identity and lived experience, through collective critical reflection and discourse, that challenged everyone to recognize patterns of globalized migrant labor.

Both Formal and Informal Learning as Significant sites for Transformational Learning

When asking our participants to identify those components of the program that triggered and facilitated transformational learning, many responded with the answers the researchers had anticipated: substantive, rigorous research materials; daily critical discourse and reflection; in-depth visits to schools serving students from different socioeconomic backgrounds; and individual research projects, to name a few. Confirming the researchers' expectations, many participants agreed that the theoretically substantive course materials and readings they were provided prior to departure, as well as their participation in seminars by faculty of Hong Kong University, enabled them to develop a rich theoretical vocabulary to draw upon in order to interpret their transformational learning experiences. Some also discussed the significance of being able to visit schools of all kinds, not just the first-tier schools originally recommended by our host. All of the participants commented on the benefit of synthesizing theory and practice (through use of teaching demonstrations and observations) in the program. Based on this feedback, the multiple components of the program seemed to have worked together effectively to facilitate participant learning.

What was surprising to the researchers was the role of informal learning opportunities embedded in the program that also triggered transformations. Three types of informal learning were mentioned by participants: (1) informal interaction with local students and teachers in various contexts; (2) self-directed learning opportunities pursued by different individuals to serve

their distinctive learning needs; and (3) their participation in critical incidents (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2006). Levine described her transformational learning occurred in unexpected places:

[These] experiences took place in the time spent outside of our daily routine. Spending time in the markets, downtown, discussions with fellow students, sitting and catching up to our readings at cafes, interacting with people visiting and living there... this is where we saw the migrant workers, the tourists, the investors, the community, students, etc.

Joe concurred with Levine, noting that "...the exchanges with teachers and students at the schools we visited contributed the most to my transformative experiences." Jeff talked about his conversation with teachers from Guangzhou during one dinner. He considered their conversation to be "...informal but so real. Those candid conversations left a far greater impression than all the 'happy happy propaganda' combined". On the other hand, several participants structured their own self-directed learning activities by engaging in focused discussions with faculty, staff, and students to ask for additional guidance and resources relevant to their individual research interests. Many participants made special mention of the generosity and efforts that their local contacts demonstrated to facilitate their learning processes.

Finally, many participants specifically pointed out their attendance at the annual Tiananmen Square Memorial held in Hong Kong's largest park on June 4th as a particularly powerful transformative learning experience that should be highlighted as an essential part of the program. The Tiananmen Square Memorial is an annual candlelight vigil, organized by a broad range of Hong Kong community-based organizations to memorialize the student protesters who were murdered on June 4th, 1989 in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China. The ceremony was not a mandatory part of the program, and was originally suggested serendipitously by a Hong Kong University colleague, but the researchers strongly encouraged students to attend. As a result, this moving event, by demonstrating a local community's concerns for social justice and human rights in Chinese society, became one of the program's most empowering events as well as a profound learning site for the participants.

Conclusion

A short-term study abroad program in a transnational space with program components that encouraged adult learners to constantly reflect, compare, and contrast their cross-cultural experiences through discourse, research, and writing proved to be a supportive context for transformational learning. While cross-cultural experience alone may or may not help facilitate transformational learning (Hemphill, 1994), a rigorous and structured learning context, as well as in-depth local site visits, personal biographies, self-directed learning activities, informal learning opportunities, and critical reflection of transnational experiences can constitute valuable learning sources for transformational learning.

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